SECTION II: MUSIC AND TRANSCULTURE

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READING ADORNO: FROM SCHOENBERG TO DJ

SHADOW

In the five decades since it was introduced to academia, cultural studies has seen major advances in the understanding of the sociology of popular culture—popular music in particular—and of the value of popular cultural forms in the lives of the youth and subcultures who consume it. But while cultural studies demands that we take popular culture seriously and pay due diligence to the traditional prejudices against so-called ‘low’ culture, much less has been done to test how popular music measures up to the exacting standards aesthetes such as Theodor Adorno who theorise about the work of art and its effects on the recipients. The reason for this is that we are often reluctant to ‘subject’ popular culture to any kind of stringent aesthetic critique for fear of accusations of cultural elitism, and of wanting to subject popular culture to standards derived from ‘high’ culture—standards that are not those of popular culture. This accusation is based on the assumption that the criteria we use to evaluate cultural texts have always been derived from ‘high’ culture, and that it is inevitable that popular culture will always fall short of those standards. This assumption overlooks the possibility of establishing a ‘middle ground’ of cultural critique in which we judge the value of texts according to standards that can be universally applied to any cultural text that seeks a prominent place in the public’s imagination. That we should expect both Picasso and Lady Gaga to take that responsibility seriously has nothing to do with the kind of culture they produce. This search for a middle ground for cultural critique is at the heart of Adorno’s aesthetic theory. It has often gone undiagnosed, however, due to Adorno’s reputation as the archetypal ‘grumpy old man’—or even worse, a ‘grumpy old Marxist’—a curmudgeon left over from a past age of cultural critique, and the kind of figure that contemporary academia must avoid.

To dismiss Adorno based on this stereotype, however, is to ignore his formidable musicological training and the relatively minor place of his critique of mass culture in his work. This misperception is not helped by the two most common ways that new readers come to Adorno. The first of these is the approach taken by undergraduate courses in cultural studies, which are in the habit of reading the single chapter, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in isolation from the rest of Dialectic of Enlightenment, thereby elevating one aspect of Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique above all others. The other common approach to Adorno is through publications of his
collected essays, in which his writings on mass culture usually feature prominently. No doubt, Routledge’s publication of Adorno’s collected essays on the culture industry in the ‘Routledge Classics’ series makes perfect economic sense, but it gives the naive reader the impression that Adorno was somehow obsessed with attacking anything that fell short of Beethoven. This is an unhelpful stereotype, because it overlooks the fact that Adorno develops his critique of the culture industry in response to his extensive work in musicology and aesthetics. The best reflection of Adorno’s attitude to popular culture is his mature essay, “On Popular Music,” in which, while acknowledging the traditional belief in the inferiority of popular culture, he recognizes the necessity of critiquing the grounds of that belief. This is the Adorno examined here - the musicologist, practicing composer, and aesthete, who provides us with a working model for critiquing popular music upon musicological, not ideological grounds.

This paper makes use of Adorno in what may seem to be a decidedly un-Adornian manner. It uses Adorno’s aesthetic theory to argue that it is possible to see popular music as deserving of the same sincere respect that Adorno often reserved for his teacher, Alban Berg, and Berg’s teacher, Arnold Schoenberg. This paper argues that we can see in the music of the popular hip-hop artist, DJ Shadow, a resistance to the ‘rules’ of mass culture that is reminiscent of Schoenberg’s resistance to the rules that constrained composers’ freedom in the early twentieth century. Insofar as Adorno holds Schoenberg’s difficult atonal music in the highest regard, it is possible to argue that popular music such as DJ Shadow’s is deserving of the same high regard, for musicological, not ideological reasons.

**Locating Adorno’s critical aesthetics**

There are two entry points into reading Adorno: his aesthetic theory, and his sociological critique of totalitarianism. The two are interlinked, insofar as he develops the aesthetic theory against the background of a critique of the evolution of Enlightenment reason into an “instrumental reason” that is the ideological backbone of authoritarian society. For Adorno, it is the particular responsibility of art to renounce and resist such social stasis, and he develops his aesthetic theory in order to understand the artistic principles that make this possible. *Aesthetic Theory* ([1970] 2002) therefore has two aims. The first is to identify the space occupied by art in an “administered society” that does not tolerate opposition; the second task is to establish the manner in which this “autonomous” art is able to confront administered society from a position of, and with the voice of alterity.

Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* is founded on the premise that it is possible to judge some cultural texts as being more or less valuable than others, and to do

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